**Keeping it Real: Literary Impersonality under Neoliberalism**

In 1956, the German critic Hugo Friedrich identified a list of common attributes used to describe modernist poetry.[1] Derived from French, German, Spanish, and English critical traditions, it reads like a *summa* of the ideology of modernism: "disorientation, disintegration of the familiar, loss of order, fragmentism, reversibility … brutal abruptness, dislocation, astigmatism, alienation" (Friedrich 1956: 22).[2] The problem with this list, as Friedrich himself was well aware (1956: 19ff.), is that it describes modernism in a purely negative fashion. Modernism becomes a singular tale of loss and deprivation rather than a productive, politically heterogeneous phenomenon. The task would thus seem to be to rewrite certain modernist categories in a manner that foregrounds their productive originality and revolutionary or counter-revolutionary potential. Fredric Jameson has attempted to do just this with one of Hugo Friedrich's central critical categories: *Entpersönlichung* or "depersonalisation."[3] Where for Friedrich depersonalisation is the subjective correlate of a condition of alienation in which human praxis and creativity is systematically constrained, for Jameson it is a literary figuration of early twentieth-century revolutionary forces: a "longing … for some new existence outside the self, in a world radically transformed and worthy of ecstasy" (2002: 136). This would suggest that depersonalisation is a more politically ambiguous phenomenon than its habitually negative connotation might imply.

Differently from both Jameson and Friedrich, however, I understand depersonalisation as part of a broader phenomenon of "impersonality" inherent in the capitalist world-system as such. That is, I take modernist depersonalisation to be but one variation of a larger socio-cultural process of impersonality that unfolds across the *longue durée* of capitalist modernity, and whose forms and valences mutate depending upon the historical and geo-political context. Such impersonality has many modalities – e.g., real abstraction (Toscano 2008; Finelli 1987; Sohn-Rethel 1978), reification (Lukács 1971; Chanson, Cukier & Monferrand 2014), alienation (Fischbach 2016) – but fundamentally it consists

[1] I am grateful to Stephen Shapiro for his comments on a previous version of this article. All remaining errors are my own.
[2] The translation is taken from Friedrich (1974: 8-9).
[3] Jameson mistakenly transcribes Friedrich's term as "*Entpersonalisierung*" (2002: 131).

in the fact that capitalism effects a systematic rupture with all traditional figures of the social bond (cf. Badiou 1999: 55), replacing them with the "cash nexus" or what Marx calls the "silent compulsion of economic relations" (Marx 1976: 899). In certain strands of the secondary literature this "silent compulsion" has become known as "impersonal domination" (e.g., Postone 1993; Heinrich 2012). Compared to previous modes of production, capital's mode of domination is said to be impersonal rather than personal; as Ellen Meiksins Wood has written, "it is the 'autonomous' laws of the economy and capital 'in the abstract' that exercise power, not the capitalist wilfully imposing his personal authority upon labour" (1995: 41). Wood thus argues that there exists a "structural indifference of capitalism to extra-economic identities" (ibid.: 267).

The problem with this position is that it tends to downplay the extent to which "impersonal domination" is *simultaneously* impersonal and personalising.[4] The present article argues that the impersonality of historical capitalism is best conceived as an uneven, often violent, combination of socio-cultural processes of depersonalisation and (re-)personalisation. It is within this purview of the *longue durée* that I shall locate the specific configuration of impersonal and personal forces in the period known as 'neoliberalism'. I shall argue that, from the perspective of the person, neoliberalism constitutes a combined and uneven world-systemic project operating through multiple socio-cultural "*personae*" (from *homo œconomicus* to "wageless life" (Denning 2010)), unified by a counter-revolutionary project of Restoration whose aim was to negate the "passion for the real" [*la passion du réel*] that characterised much of the twentieth century (Badiou 2007). I shall then use these extended sociological and philosophical elaborations as a framework within which to read two key contemporary works of world-literature: S. J. Naudé's *The Alphabet of Birds* (2015) and Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers* (2013). I interpret these works as attempts to inherit the "passion for the real" under conditions of neoliberalism; more precisely, I read them as literary rearticulations of the "passion for the real" that aim to

[4] Cinzia Arruzza (2014) has put this point differently, criticising Wood's too-sharp distinction between the "logic" and "history" of capitalism: "as soon as we accept [Wood's] distinction between the logical structure of capital and its historical dimensions, we can then accept the idea that the extraction of surplus-value takes place within the framework of relations between formally free and equal individuals without presupposing differences in juridical and political status. But we can do this only at a very high level of abstraction – that is to say, at the level of the logical structure. From the point of view of concrete history, things change radically."

identify and orient the contemporary reader towards points of the historical Real that resist the "organized disorientation" (Badiou 2008: 18) of neoliberalism. Both writers employ techniques of impersonality and depersonalisation to carve out a fragile space of resistance and formalise hope in an ethico-political absolute. In doing so, they not only extend Badiou's own reflections on the intrinsic limitations of the "passion for the real" (not least its intimate bond with violence and destruction (cf. Badiou 2007: 48-57)), but also indicate potential blind spots in Badiou's philosophical project itself.

**Capital Personified**

Much recent work in the Marxist tradition has argued that we should understand capitalism as a social institution or civilization (e.g., Fraser 2014; Arruzza 2014; Moore 2015), a contradictory amalgam of wars, money and the state (Alliez & Lazzarato 2016), or as a "totality in process" (Monferrand 2017) rather than a purely economic system. It is with this body of work in mind that I shall argue that capitalist "impersonal domination" is best conceived as a dual process of depersonalisation and (re)personalisation. This can be seen in three ways. Firstly, in *Capital*, Marx constantly stresses the way in which impersonal domination operates through structural processes of personification. In the famous preface to the first edition of *Capital* he states that "individuals are dealt with here only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories, the bearers [*Träger*] of particular class-relations and interests" (Marx 1976: 92). Capital's impersonal domination thus works through a system of categorial personifications or "masks" [*Charaktermasken*]. Whilst these personifications appear, in their *logical* immediacy, to be indifferent to the faces and bodies they force into relation, they are in fact mediated *historical* and *political* results: they are "fields of forces" (Basso 2015: 46) that condense both *longue-durée* structural tendencies and conjunctural overdeterminations. Likewise, page after page of *Capital* attests to the structural connection between the sphere of circulation and juridical personhood – the "very Eden of the innate rights of man" (Marx 1976: 280) – and the systematic brutalisation and bodily torture that occurs in the hidden abode of production. The structural impersonality of capital thus depends upon enforced structural personifications and a system of legally mediated personal violence.

Secondly, these structural personifications – the attempt, through primitive accumulation and state interpellation, to force humans into the functional *personae* of capital accumulation – cannot be separated from wider, systemically uneven, socio-cultural processes of personification. Indeed, the "person" as such might best be understood as a historically and geographically variable *dispositif* connecting – at any one time – ideological and repressive state apparatuses, citizenship discourses, spatial practices, philosophy and cultural representations.[5] The "person" is a field of class struggle, constantly shifting in line with the play of forces of a given conjuncture. Under the capitalist mode of production, the dominant *dispositif* of the person has traditionally had as its primary functions identification, separation, and simplification: it identifies and separates out individuals from transindividual collectives embedded in pre-capitalist historical natures, reducing these individuals' constitutive multiplicity to violently simplified racial, sexual, national and other categorisations.[6] The person has assumed these functions because, within the zone of commodification, capitalism requires the production and reproduction of individualised legal persons who are 'free' to sell their labour-power. The relative predominance and efficacy of these functions, however, is historically and geographically variable for two reasons. Firstly, in any social formation (especially those located at the periphery and semi-periphery of the world-system) the capitalist mode of production is articulated with residual and emergent modes of production on which it must impose its dominance, thus giving rise to situations of combined and uneven personhood.[7] Secondly, zones in which wage labour predominates are increasingly imbricated with and surrounded by zones of "wageless life" (Denning 2010) or relative surplus populations whose activity is structurally necessary to capital but which is external to its primary operations. Consequently, modes of personal capture and resistance in, say, the (semi-)peripheral "planet of slums" (Davis 2006) are distinct from those within the enfranchised public sphere of the core. Ultimately, however, whether at the periphery or the core (albeit to vastly differing extents),

[5] On the person as *dispositif*, see Esposito (2012).
[6] I am here condensing ideas found, among others, in Jodi Dean's (2016) theory of interpellation as enclosure; James Scott's (1998) work on the state construction of "legibility and simplification;" and Jason W. Moore's (2015) notion of "abstract social nature." It is also inspired by Marx's writings on wood theft, on which see Hartley (2017).
[7] For a clear historical example, see Chakrabarty (1989) on the jute mill workers of Calcutta.

workers are gendered, racialised and categorised – as Muslim, black, white, immigrant – and these categorisations overdetermine and materially affect, by reinforcing or impeding, the continued efficacy of the structural personifications of capital. The impersonal domination of capital must thus be understood as being in constant articulation with a whole network of potentially contradictory socio-cultural personifications.

Finally, at the level of the capitalist world-system itself, if the "silent compulsion" of economic relations implicitly corresponds to a period of hegemonic stability in a fully developed capitalist core, this core nonetheless relies upon continued primitive accumulation at the world-systemic periphery (cf. Jelly-Schapiro forthcoming). Impersonal capitalist consensus always has its roots in direct personal violence elsewhere in the world-system, which it repatriates to the core during periods of economic crisis (cf. Serfati 2017: 186-224). These processes overlap with a more general tendency through which financialisation, which imposes debtor-creditor dependency, gives rise to renewed forms of personal domination both at the core and the periphery (Carson 2017). Ultimately, then, it can be said that impersonality and depersonalisation, whilst the dominant tendencies of capitalist modernity, are so profoundly imbricated with (re-)personalising tendencies that it is only at a high level of abstraction that one can plausibly uphold capital's "structural indifference" to "extra-economic identities" (Wood 1995: 267).

This constant dynamic between systemic depersonalisation and regional (re-)personalisations is reproduced in the field of culture. Unlike capital itself, however, whose impersonality is tendentially "axiomatic" (cf. Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 246), in the field of culture impersonality can assume the form either of conservative "reterritorializations" (cf. Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 34) or – alternatively – of emancipatory depersonalisations. To give a general example, historically it is well known that cultural forms of personalisation (e.g., liberal individualism, romanticism, "culture") developed partly as a defence against the impersonal domination of the "cash nexus" (cf. Williams 1963). Yet this, in turn, provoked a backlash in the form of neoclassical impersonalities: fascist discipline, religious fundamentalisms, and authoritarian traditionalisms are all forms of ethico-political impersonality that reject romantic individualism. Inversely, there also exist conservative forms of personalisation which reinforce

or attempt to replace the social bond that is severed by the axiomatic of capital (e.g., regimes of race; nationalism; the neoconservative family). Emancipatory modes of impersonality subsequently develop and take aim at these sometimes violent identifications: politically, this includes practices of "solidarity," an impersonal ethico-political mode of social relation indifferent to specific national or ethnic identities, whilst, philosophically, one might cite Badiou's (2003) understanding of truths as indifferent to differences or Jacques Rancière's (1999: 36) notion of subjectivation as disidentification – both variations on communist universality. Capitalist impersonal domination, then, both at the level of the economy and of culture, is best understood as a combined and uneven process of depersonalisation and (re-)personalisation.

## The Combined and Uneven *Personae* of Neoliberalism

The internal extreme of this dynamic occurs when selected elements of personal resistance are strategically incorporated into operations of capital accumulation. It is precisely this process that Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello explore in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005 [1999]). They argue that the "artistic critique" of capitalism (against alienation and lack of autonomy and creativity) voiced during the French insurrection of May 1968 became separated from the "social critique" (of capitalist exploitation and egoism) and was incorporated into the management discourse of post-Fordist capitalism.[8] In so doing, the "anti-Oedipal" critique of centralised, hierarchical and *impersonal* bureaucratic structures became co-opted by the neoliberal restructuring of capital. Where corporations of the 1960s had purposely rejected "'personal judgements' … in decisions about promotion, in favour of 'impersonal judgement' on the basis of results" (67), managerial discourse of the 1990s reintroduced "criteria of personality and the use of personal relations" (85): "Charisma, vision, gifts of communication, intuition, mobility and generalism become the ideal traits of the new leaders – dressed-down, cool capitalists like Bill Gates or 'Ben and Jerry' … who refuse to surround themselves with the formal trappings of bureaucratic authority" (Budgen 2000: 153). At the same time, neoliberal personhood has also been understood as a backlash against second-wave feminism and the new

[8] This argument is challenged by Dardot and Laval (2013: 262).

social movements of the 1960s whose rallying cry was that "the personal is political": "the neoliberal reaction consolidated in the 1980s recodes the person as the personal: it privatizes politics by making personal experience the test of political action; it reduces political action to the representation of identities, with the crucial qualification that these identities, though passed off as equivalent, are not at all equal" (Haines 2017: 182; cf. Dean 2016 chap. 1). On these readings, neoliberalism effected a double privatisation of the person: a repersonalisation of the private corporation and a reactionary privatisation of an attempted depersonalisation of the private realm.

Other critiques of neoliberal subjectivity have developed along primarily Foucauldian lines. Dardot and Laval, for example, hold that neoliberalism should be understood as a "rationality" which effects a "generalization of competition as a behavioural norm and of the enterprise as a model of subjectivation" (2013: 4). A new work ethic is said to have developed whereby "individual aspirations and the enterprise's objectives of excellence … can only be conjoined if everyone becomes a small enterprise" (ibid.: 266). Consequently, as Wendy Brown puts it,

> we may (and neoliberalism interpellates us as subjects who do) think and act like contemporary market subjects where monetary wealth generation is not the immediate issue, for example, in approaching one's education, health, fitness, family life, or neighbourhood … Thus, one might approach one's dating life in the mode of an entrepreneur or investor … A student might undertake charitable service to enrich her college application profile. (2015: 31)

The irony is that whilst this internalisation of market principles is meant to offer flexibility and subjective dynamism, it may actually erode personality altogether. Post-Fordist short-termism, lack of long-term predictable careers, and instability of "projects" produce a "pliant" self that is little more than what Richard Sennett has described, in a phrase reminiscent of the modernist artwork, as a "collage of fragments unceasing in its becoming, ever open to new experience" (cited in Dardot & Laval 2013: 290). As in the Sartrean dialectic of winner loses, neoliberal personalisation begets further depersonalisation.

One of the problems with such theories of neoliberal conduct, however, is that they often suppose a single subject of neoliberalism known variously as

*homo œconomicus* or the "entrepreneurial subject." Yet the supposed reign of *homo œconomicus* would then be coeval with the widely documented demise of the single revolutionary subject – and privileged revolutionary site – that many claim was hegemonic in the workers' movement: the male industrial worker in the factory. As Aaron Benanav et al. (2015: 277) have written of the contemporary moment: "The working class – always internally differentiated – displays a diminishing capacity for unification under a single hegemonic figure, thus realising its always latent tendency to decompose into fragments, facing off one against the other." On the one hand, there is nothing surprising about such social and political decomposition during a period of increasing deindustrialisation, the demise of the trade unions, and totalising processes of privatisation. On the other, however, the focus, especially in Foucauldian accounts, on the figure of *homo œconomicus* at the expense of all other subjects of neoliberalism suggests that the social and geographical scope of such approaches is too limited. Annie McClanahan has recently argued that "by characterizing neoliberalism through a specific kind of entrepreneurial subject … we miss the possibility that neoliberalism is not the becoming-economic of the non-economic, but rather the introduction of economic exigencies into the lives of a group – white, educated, upper middle-class citizens of the developed world – formerly protected from them" (2017: 512). She suggests that a more "exemplary" subject of the present would be "an underemployed part-timer, probably working in the service sector, buying her groceries on her credit card and cashing her paychecks at a check cashing service, renting rather than owning her home, barely able to survive day to day and thus unlikely to see any of this precarity as an interest-bearing investment in her own future" (ibid.: 513). Furthermore, Eli Jelly-Schapiro's (forthcoming) important account of the "multiple temporalities" of neoliberalism across the world-system – he names them primitive accumulation, expanded reproduction, and "accumulation by fabrication" – identifies a range of political subjects, each of which is dominant in one or another time-space of the neoliberal world-system: migrant "wageless life" (the phrase is Denning's 2010), the wage labourer, and the proletarianised middle class. If theories of "neoliberalism" are to retain their critical incisiveness, they will thus have to broaden their conception of its *dramatis personae*: no longer *homo œconomicus* alone, but an uneven combination of exemplary subjects which, in varying rhythms

and ratios, constitutes the objective fact of neoliberal social (de)composition and the diffuse material and geographical basis for the emergence of any future revolutionary subject.

Beyond this emphasis on the world-systemic multiplicity of neoliberal *personae*, however, I would like to suggest that the philosophy of Alain Badiou offers a rich new perspective on the nature of neoliberal subjectivity. Badiou never uses the term neoliberalism but his philosophical account of contemporary subjectivity deals with many of its recognised features. For Badiou the period since approximately 1975 has been characterised by worldlessness.[9] In his terms, a world is a logic of appearance in which all are entitled to a name and which is "tensed" by "points"; naming signifies the possibility of an inscription into a political process (e.g., class struggle or national liberation), whilst a "point" submits the situation to the decisional pressure of an absolute "yes or no" decision (especially characteristic of revolutionary situations). Today, Badiou argues (writing at the turn of the twenty-first century), there exists no logic of the visible, a general acceptance of non-nomination and a general "pointlessness"; worldlessness has replaced the world, excluding the majority of humanity from visibility (potential or actual) and from the absolute yes or no of revolutionary decision – i.e., from the possibility of political subjectivation. The logic of a world has given way to the anarchic illogic of universal substitutability, commodified ideals of youthfulness, passive hedonism, and a present so fleeting as seemingly to defy all proactive formation.

How did this situation come about? For Badiou it is the end result of a sustained Thermidorean reaction to the last historical sequence of the "communist hypothesis" (1966-75);[10] that is, neoliberalism is a fundamentally counter-revolutionary subjective project. The communist hypothesis in the twentieth century was driven by what Badiou calls a "passion for the real" [*la passion du réel*] (2007: 32): "There is a conviction, laden with pathos, that we are being summoned to the real of a beginning." Where the nineteenth century "announced, dreamed, and promised," the twentieth century "declared it would make man, here and now" (ibid.). In stark contrast to the ever-calculating

[9] What follows is an abbreviated reconstruction of arguments put forth in Badiou (2009; 2014). Badiou is not alone in this somewhat bizarre-sounding diagnosis: it can also be found in Franck Fischbach (2016) and Gopal Balakrishnan (2009: 26).

[10] Badiou (2008: 35–6) identifies two modern sequences of the communist hypothesis: 1789–1871 and 1917–1976, within which 1966–1975 constitutes something like a sub-sequence.

entrepreneurial subject, this conviction was characterized by a "steadfast indifference to its cost" (ibid.: 33) – both physical and personal. The "passion for the real" was thus, in one sense, a violent and destructive desire for *immediate* collective self-actualisation, a desire that found all semblance or mediation intrinsically suspect (hence the twentieth-century's gravitation to the slogan of the purge); yet it also harboured a 'subtractive' orientation – "a differential and differentiating passion devoted to the construction of a minimal difference" (as in Malevich's *White on White* (1918)) (56) – which understands the gap between real and semblance as itself real and thereby aims "to invent content at the very place of the minimal difference" (57). More recently, Badiou has redefined destruction and subtraction as the negative and affirmative parts of negation respectively, proposing that any inheritance of the passion for the real will involve "maintain[ing] the complete concept of negation from the point of view of subtraction" rather than destruction (i.e., the inverse of the twentieth-century). In other words, any contemporary revolutionary project must avoid the following three *partial* types of negation: negation without destruction (what Badiou calls capitalist-parliamentarianism); negation without subtraction (nihilist will-to-obliteration; terrorist violence); and subtraction without destruction (a semi-depressive "dropping out" of the world; or, the Hegelian beautiful soul).[11] To inherit the passion for the real under neoliberalism is thus to invent affirmative negations – productive, enduring recompositions of the world – and yet to do so in a situation of general *worldlessness*.

The exemplary figure of Badiou's philosophy is the "faithful subject." Without wishing to rehearse Badiou's theory of subjectivation in full, suffice it to say that for Badiou the entirety of ethics comes down to fidelity to the event: "Do all that you can to persevere in that which exceeds your perseverance. Persevere in the interruption. Seize in your being that which has seized and broken you" (Badiou 2001: 47). In the terms of this essay, fidelity should be understood as an *impersonal* operation. It is impersonal because whilst an individual belongs to a truth-process as 'herself' (a multiple singularity) she is simultaneously *in excess of herself* – fidelity "passes through" her (Badiou 2001: 45). Badiouian impersonality, like the passion for the real, is that within one's

[11] I am drawing here on Noys (2010: 146-7).

self which goes beyond oneself.[12] From the perspective of the *dispositif* of the person, it is a process of profound, emancipatory depersonalisation. It invokes militant subjective orientations at odds not only with entrepreneurial rationality and youthful hedonism, but also with one further neoliberal ideological persona: the victim. Where the "passion for the real" implied a conception of man as a programme or project, the dominant ideology of the twenty-first century is, according to Badiou, a "project-less humanism" premised on the victimised body; "man" becomes "a substantialist or naturalist category, which we attain through empathy in the spectacle of suffering" (Badiou 2007: 176). This so-called "animal humanism" (Badiou 2007: 175) is the vision of humanity imposed by the neoliberal Restoration and lives on in what Nina Powers and Alberto Toscano (2009: 32) have called "the 'antitotalitarian' credo … and the anticommunist philosophies of finitude, liberalism, and human rights." If neoliberal management discourse was a "reactive subject" which positively incorporated the joyous "artistic" and hedonist elements of the global uprisings of the long 1960s, then the pious champions of human rights and the *Pax Americana* tempered that joy with an equally novel melancholy of finitude.[13] To rearticulate Badiou's argument in terms of the present essay, then, one might say that neoliberalism relies upon a *dispositif of the person that violently separates the body from its impersonal potential.*

We are now in a position to propose some provisional theses on combined and uneven neoliberal subjectivity and its relation to impersonality:

1. Foucauldian theories of *homo œconomicus* are powerful but partial: they underestimate the extent to which neoliberalism consists of multiple temporalities and uneven geographies, producing multiple exemplary *personae* (e.g., "wageless life," the wage labourer, and the proletarianised middle class). These structural personifications predominate over – and enter into occasionally

[12] As Alberto Toscano observes, "it is a passion that inhabits its subjects as what is in themselves more than themselves" (Badiou 2007: 220, n. 32).

[13] By "reactive subject" Badiou (2009: 54ff.) means those renegade figures (he has in mind the *nouveaux philosophes*) who, though once involved in a political sequence, now deny the necessity of rupture embodied in the political event, yet who incorporate (and often passively benefit from) certain of its novelties whilst producing new discourses to delegitimise faithful subjectivity.

explosive combinations with – far wider socio-cultural practices of personhood.

2. The multiplication of exemplary neoliberal personae is coextensive with the widely documented *objective* decomposition of the workers' movement throughout the "long downturn." This decomposition is at once social and geographical, generating confusion over both the *identity* and *location* of the contemporary revolutionary subject.
3. At the level of *subjectivity*, neoliberalism constitutes a collective "reactive subject" whose unconscious is the spectre of the communist hypothesis.[14] It is composed of multiple practices of (to risk a strategically inexact analogy) *subjective primitive accumulation*: where objective primitive accumulation separates workers from the land, subjective primitive accumulation separates bodies from Ideas.[15] Neoliberalism operates *personalising privatisations of the emancipatory potential of the impersonal.*

This is the subjective matrix in which contemporary world-literature intervenes.

**Impersonality in Contemporary World-Literature**

In what follows I shall argue that SJ Naudé's *The Alphabet of Birds* and Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers* intervene in this neoliberal conjuncture in three ways. First, they both attempt to inherit, and remain faithful to, the passion for the real that is structurally denied by neoliberalism; they do so via experimentations with impersonality and depersonalisation that foreground the Badiouian virtue of courage, which Benjamin Noys has suggestively reinterpreted as "a virtue that orients itself to a point, to a Real, in the intervallic period of the absence of the event … a non-heroic political virtue … woven out

[14] Cf. Badiou (2009: 56): "the form of the faithful subject nonetheless remains the unconscious of the reactive subject."

[15] Cf. Badiou (2014: 125): "The violence that compels the individual to become a commodified body [*un corps marchand*] is not direct violence against the body, it is a violence done to the capacity of the body in the idea, to its capacity to be the bearer of something other than its own interests." (I am grateful to Daria Saburova for help in translating this difficult sentence). For Badiou, "democracy" in neoliberal guise consists in the violent command to "live without Idea" (ibid.); the "bare power" [*pouvoir nu*] that secretly drives contemporary democracy "exerts considerable violence at the level of what one might call the frontier zone between bodies and ideas" (ibid.: 128).

of political memories which are not mere nostalgia, but also critique and re-formulation" (Noys 2010: 153). Naudé and Kushner critically mobilise a certain nostalgia for modernism and the avant-garde as a way of (re)formulating militant twentieth-century subjectivities that resist the hegemonic figures of neoliberalism. Second, in line with Fredric Jameson's transcoding of Aristotelian *anagnorisis* ('recognition') as the 'discovery' of collective political subjects who have previously been overlooked – "the coming into view of those multitudinous others suppressed from the official story and field of vision" (2009: 565) – I hold that Kushner and Naudé provide *subjective* cognitive maps of selected subjects of neoliberalism, enabling an aesthetically unified representation of that which is, objectively, geographically and socially dispersed. Finally, I argue that these works of fiction suggest potential blind spots in Badiou's philosophy itself, not least the manner in which faithful subjects, *pace* Badiou, "are incessantly undone, circumvented, manipulated by a Subject [Capital] which is both made up of nothing but their very actions and simultaneously an abstraction over which they seem to exercise no ultimate control" (Toscano 2007: 198). Both works are examples of what one might call "anti-worldless literature": a committed search for the traces of a "world" within the non-world of neoliberalism – "a network of signs that we can scan and assemble" (Badiou 2014: 113).

The remarkable stories collected in S. J. Naudé's *The Alphabet of Birds* (2015) span the entire globe: Milan, rural South Africa, a castle near Nuremberg, Berlin, Hanoi, Tokyo, Paris, Lesotho, Johannesburg, Phoenix, London, Dubai, and Cape Town. Within and between these places, Naudé – acutely attuned to the capitalist production of space – is drawn to those locations or architectural styles characterised by combined and uneven development: a state-of-the-art neo-modernist hunting lodge cheek-by-jowl with a corrugated iron shack in the South African outback (2015: 76-77); "[r]emarkable," the narrator of one story exclaims, "the proximity of the two things: the perfect and the abject, the room and the destroyed space" (128). Like the Italian futurists who inspire the first story "The Noise Machine," one senses that, for Naudé, such combined and uneven spaces are not simply statically objective geographies, but produce a subjective surplus: they are the "'weak links in the chain,' where the Real may appear without warning" (Jameson 2012: 474). Four of the stories feature a gay

male protagonist (different each time) who has recently quit his high-flying job at an elite multinational corporation. We follow his string of erotic encounters across global cities and their underworlds, his endless nights of partying and intoxication. In each case, the narrator – despite his tendency to Bacchanalian self-destruction – is always the mundane counterpart to a mysterious male figure driven by strangely absolute existential "visions," neo-modernist artistic projects, or what one character calls a "hard, *impersonal* scheme" (223; emphasis added). Such bouts of drug-fuelled reverie are counterposed both to these impersonal projects and to the knowledge, or presence, of the decaying body of the protagonist's mother (a recurring figure), who is dying of terminal cancer. Even those stories which do not feature a male protagonist contain damaged or decaying female bodies. The principal interest of these stories lies in the way in which, in and through the twin neoliberal figures of the victim and the hedonist, they stage acts of fidelity to absolute ethico-political projects which are *indifferent* to the suffering bodies through which they are realised.

In the story "Van," Sandrien, a white Afrikaner woman, retrains to become a nurse. She cares for patients – most of whom are dying from HIV/AIDS – in a provincial rural area near Blomfontein in South Africa. When she learns that she is suffering from terminal cancer she rejects further treatment so as to dedicate herself to her work. Increasingly pathologically driven by an absolute determination to cure or care for her patients irrespective of personal cost, she alienates her husband, Kobus, who attempts to make her see reason, and becomes entangled in a complex, transnational web of finance capital, NGOs and corrupt state institutions. Of all the stories in the collection, it is "Van" that shows most clearly the inseparability of any possible inheritance of the "passion for the real" from the many mediations of the world-systemic project of neoliberalism.

In Naudé's fictional universe there exists a moral morphology of the body: roundness or curves are outward signs of corruption whilst angularity and corporeal dissolution are indices of virtue. The "round head" (2015: 85) and "squeaky clean … little rolls of fat" of Walter Mabunda, a corrupt provincial health minister, and the cheeks, "still lovely as a baby's" (44), of Mrs Nyathi, a cunning and manipulative guest house owner, are in stark contrast to the "sore, sharp corners of bodies" (56) that Sandrien discovers on her rounds. Sandrien

admits to being surprised at discovering the existence of these hidden subjects: "I could not have imagined. … Invisible, just on the other side of these hills … Dozens of them" (56). Combining the recurring figure of modernist linearity and abstraction with the sudden "discovery" (or *anagnorisis*) of a new collective subject, the story traces Sandrien's absolute commitment to these suffering, angular bodies.[16] When told by Lerato (an example of the corrupt, post-apartheid *nouveaux riches*) who blocks Sandrien's efforts at every turn, that "we can only do what we can do," Sandrien replies: "'We can do more, much more!' *We can find the divine fibres in our weak flesh, the undiscovered grace in our entrails!*" (70; emphasis in original). These "divine fibres" and "undiscovered grace" are figures of that impersonal potentiality that is so violently extinguished by the neoliberal reactive subject. Sandrien engages in a "passion for the real" worthy of the twentieth century: her resolve is absolute and her indifference to her own well-being is borderline maniacal, her body gradually wasting away and dehydrating into dust. Yet her fidelity to an ethico-political absolute is intrinsically marred because her project is internally structured by a misguided saviour fantasy: "she will be able to keep everyone safe. Soon she will be able to carry all the dying. She will hold them in the palm of her hand" (72). This narcissism is connected to Sandrien's inability to read her situation: "All these connections make me dizzy … I don't know what my involvement is supposed to be" (79). The story is thus tragic, in the precise sense that tragedy entails "the recognition of a strain of insouciant refractoriness to human agency that is woven into the very fabric of action itself" (Aryeh Kosman, cited in Eagleton 2003: 78). Yet here the "insouciant refractoriness" is not some transhistorical "all-too-human" flaw, but that point at which the Real of the self meets the Real of Capital to undermine individual life-projects.

Sandrien constantly attempts – unsuccessfully – to access antiretroviral drugs for her patients from (corrupt) state-run provincial health services and a US NGO named "Widereach," loosely modelled on the "U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief" (PEPFAR). At one point she is told that she will not receive antiretrovirals because Widereach's "emphasis will be on

[16] Elsewhere one character is described as a "living Giacometti" (Naudé 2015: 16) with a "bone structure … angular, like something from a Futurist painting" (18). In yet another story, a dancer's body is described as "[l]ike something from modernist photography – an Edward Weston study of the body as abstraction" (280).

abstinence campaigns, rather than condom use … These are the values of Middle America: we're talking faith-based organisations. Those are the ones now holding the money" (73). Indeed, when PEPFAR was introduced in 2003, current Vice President of the United States, Mike Pence, told congress: "Abstinence and marital faithfulness before condom distribution are the cure for what ails the families of Africa … It is important that we not just send them money, but that we send them values that work" (cited in Frankel 2017). Yet even those PEPFAR schemes that do not promote the Orwellian-sounding "A-B-C strategy (Abstinence – Be Faithful – Condom Use)" have still tended to promote its politico-economic counterpart, neoliberalism, by "systematically ignor[ing] the role of structural inequality and the differential political economy of risk, while focusing entirely on 'high-risk' individual behaviors" (Sastry & Dutta 2013: 25). PEPFAR measures the effects of HIV/AIDS in terms of "the number of hours and dollar amounts of productivity lost" (ibid.: 28); it binds HIV/AIDS – via Orientalist representations – to local cultural norms (e.g., early marriage and polygamy). It also systematically ignores the structural factors behind such conduct, such as change in agricultural ownership patterns or large-scale unemployment resulting from structural adjustment programs (ibid.: 31). In terms of the capitalist dynamics of impersonality and (re-)personalisation, then, Sandrien finds herself at the centre of two interlinked processes. On the one hand, South African state institutions are insufficiently impersonal, mired in such profound corruption that personal dependency trumps bureaucratic abstraction at every turn. On the other, the re-personalising values of neoconservatism, forged as an ideological solution to the social contradictions of the neoliberal counterrevolution (cf. Harvey 2005: 82ff.), have now become the moral wing of US-led neo-imperial privatisation. It is thus no surprise that Sandrien feels "dizzy" at all these "connections."

The true object of Naudé's scorn, however, is the white Afrikaner farmers. No longer assured of their material privileges, many have had to reinvent themselves. The farmers affected in "Van" have two options: sell out to hunting-farm developers or set up a funeral business. Those who opt for the latter now use the fridges that once housed slaughtered cattle to store the plentiful supply of black HIV/AIDS cadavers until they can be buried in the – expensively – hard ground ("Soil structure determines profit," Manie informs

Sandrien). It is thus in the interests of the white Afrikaners to keep the black corpses flowing. When Kobus tells Sandrien he is considering starting a funeral business – "One must adapt, one must naturalise" (69) – she tells him that if he does so she will never look him in the eye again. Indeed, there is a sense in which Kobus mobilises the ideology of modest domestic comforts to counteract Sandrien's radical impersonality. On one level, everything he utters or writes is a *perfectly reasonable* response to his wife's monomaniacal and self-sacrificial behaviour; on the other, it is an attempt to separate Sandrien from her impersonal potential, from that within her that is more than herself: the "divine fibres" of her "weak flesh." First he tells her not to feel guilty about their relative privilege, then he accuses her of not wanting to be part of a community ("I have my community," she tells him), until finally, at his wit's end, he writes her a letter: "*You want to collapse the pain and stench into one blinding truth. Where do you make the people behind the truth disappear to? And do they understand your abstract manner of saving them?*" (81; emphasis in original). On one level, he is of course right, but on another, we know that from Burke to the *nouveaux philosophes* reactionary thought proceeds by way of accusations of "abstraction." Predictably, yet understandably, Kobus' own truth consists in "*the silence of our bedroom, the flashes of lightning passing between our skins…when I stick out my fingers and am touching real flesh. And for me that is enough*" (82; emphasis in original). Kobus is, in a sense, an ideal-type literary realist, insisting on the importance of the human individuals behind the structures and truths, maintaining the primacy of the suffering and erotic body, the domestic space of the home, the concrete over the abstract, and a defender of the "minor sorrow" (81). In an astonishing ideological *legerdemain*, Kobus effectively recasts what Auerbach once referred to as "creatural realism" (2003: 247) into a counterrevolutionary fidelity to finitude under neoliberalism.

Yet Sandrien's own absolute fidelity, as we have seen, has tragic flaws. "If only you had an idea of the scale of things, of how puny you are," Lerato tells her when accused of having hired an assassin to kill her. By failing adequately to map the web of social relations in which she is involved, Sandrien's project is scuppered on the rocks of romanticism: "The system is irrelevant," she says at one point, "it's about the victims" (71). Yet, as we have seen, the system precisely is not irrelevant: at every step, a powerful combination of predatory international capital and intra-state corruption have prevented her –

and by extension her patients – from receiving lifesaving antiretrovirals. Her absoluteness of vision prevents a serious engagement with the *world-systemic mediations* of HIV/AIDS, thus ironically reproducing the very neoliberal individualism of the NGOs that impede her. This insistence on absoluteness is also a potential weakness in Badiou's philosophy itself – an underestimation of the extent to which capital and ideology subtly, immanently unwork the projects of faithful subjects. Nonetheless, Sandrien's impersonal heroism powerfully delineates a space within the neoliberal ideological environment, dominated by paeans to finitude, in which something else – something like a world – becomes visible. In a later story we learn that, shortly before she died, the state-of-the art hunting lodge – intended to host a World Cup after-party for global VIPs – has been burnt to the ground.

Rachel Kushner's 2013 novel *The Flamethrowers* extends many of these ideas. It is a novel about an anonymous young female motorcyclist who moves to New York from Reno in the 1970s to become an artist. She becomes involved with a successful male Italian-American artist, Sandro Valera, whose minimalist art plays on the shift that is underway in New York from Fordism to post-Fordism, and whose father was initially an Italian futurist (modelled on Marinetti) who later became a motorcycle and rubber tyre magnate (modelled on Henry Ford). Towards the end of the novel, the protagonist visits the now deceased magnate's automobile factories in Milan, at the height of the *anni di piombo* and the ferment of insurrection. *The Flamethrowers* is one of the most profound contemporary experiments in literary impersonality precisely because it is so alert to the manner in which what begins as an emancipatory depersonalisation – such as the futurist desire for an impersonal speed that can break with all oppressive bonds of the past – can swiftly become incorporated into new, more powerful capitalist processes of personification. As Eli Jelly-Schapiro (forthcoming) has observed, it also maps and connects the "three temporalities of contemporary capital" and their specific modes of resistance.

Impersonality is integral to Kushner's stylistic project. Consciously opposed to the personal, self-expressive tendency of much contemporary fiction, Kushner "wanted a narrator who could convey a tone that was like thought and wasn't at all like a spoken account or historical testimony or a confession or a performance of any kind" (Hart & Rocca 2015: 201). Inspired

by the narratorial voice of Roberto Bolaño's *Savage Detectives*, which she describes as being "like water" (Barron 2013), the voice of the first-person narrator in *The Flamethrowers* is, relatively speaking, "neutral." Kushner achieves this effect by associating the voice with the passive, self-withdrawing nature of the nameless protagonist herself: just as "Reno" is dominated by the speech of others, a speech on which she thrives, from which she learns, so the guiding narratorial idiom subordinates itself to multiple character idioms for long stretches, or – during passages of interior monologue – assumes a casual yet essay-like impersonality whose complexity is at odds with the protagonist's supposed naivety.[17] This stylistic and characterological passivity becomes integral to one of the recurring themes of the novel: the idea of waiting. Contrary to the patriarchal men – whether avant-gardists, artists, or business men – who act according to rigidly designed plans, "Reno" waits: "I, too, had it in me to wait. To expect change to come from the outside, to concentrate on the task of meeting it, waiting to meet it, rather than going out and finding it" (Kushner 2013: 88). There is a paradoxical proactivity at work in this waiting; it is a "task" that requires what Alberto Toscano has called, in a different context, "*non-dogmatic anticipation*" (2010: 197; emphasis in original). Thus, the impersonal style becomes integral to a larger project of militant waiting whose aim is precisely to scan the terrain of worldlessness for the advent of an event or an irruption of the Real.

The style is also connected to the autodeigetic narrator's desire for what might be called an *absolute non-relationality*. In the opening pages, for example, skiing is understood as a type of drawing whose ideal would be tracelessness (Kushner 2013: 9) whilst "Reno's" youthful adoration of Flip Farmer, a land speed record holder, is inspired by the feeling that, in his presence, "[w]e weren't individuals but a surface he moved over, smiling and remote" (ibid.: 21). Later, "Reno" works as a "China Girl," a model whose facial skin tones are used by lab technicians for cinematic colour-control for Caucasian skin.[18] Spliced into film leaders, China Girls generally went unseen by the public, but if they *were* seen "they flashed by so fast they had to be instantly reconstructed in the mind" (87): "I would be looked at, but by people who didn't know who I was. I would

[17] "Reno" is the name ascribed to the protagonist by others.
[18] This is a further example of the impersonal-personal dynamic: the mechanical impersonality of film is, in fact, a deeply racializing technology designed to codify whiteness as the social norm.

be looked at but remain anonymous" (85). This desire simultaneously to be looked at yet to remain anonymous links impersonality to a failed – or perhaps subtracted – dialectic of recognition, in which the *formal* prerequisites of interpersonal recognition are minimally present but are undermined by a depersonalising force which is felt to be emancipatory. "Reno" elsewhere speaks of personhood itself as a prison: "We seemed to share certain ideas about what happens in childhood, when you have to place yourself under the sign of your own name, your face, your voice, your outward reality. When you become a fixed position … as if the container of my person were some kind of terrible mistake" (101). In a classic anti-Oedipal manoeuvre, speed and anonymity thus become for "Reno" a means of resisting the violent personifications of the *dispositif* of the person.

Yet the novel complicates this accelerationist logic by demonstrating that both speed and anonymity are themselves connected to violent processes of personification. Kushner's ingenious, if potentially misleading, conflation of Marinetti and Henry Ford in the single figure of T. P. Valera subtly undermines "Reno's" emancipatory conception of speed. From the primal scene in which Valera's first sighting of a motorcycle is fused with his erotic desire for the woman riding it – a scene that occurs in Alexandria and conforms to Jameson's (1991: 309-10) argument that modernism is the result of incomplete modernisation[19] – speed becomes coextensive with what one might term *petro-patriarchy*: a (literally) toxic masculinity informed by a misogynist metaphysics in which "[w]omen were trapped in time" (Kushner 2013: 77), destined to become "pocket cunts" (76). Yet what began as an avant-garde explosion has become, by the 1970s, a mainstream Honda advert: "Speed is every man's right" (13). Matthew Huber has argued that oil has been integral to the rise of a mode of sociality he calls "petro-privatism" which underlies neoliberal subjectivity: "Energy powered the privatisation of social space. By extending the productive forces of capital … to the reproductive forces of everyday life, a specific stratum of American workers could now live, think, and feel an individuated sense of *power* over the geographies of everyday practices. Life appeared to some as a coherent space of privatised freedom" (2013: xv). As well as enabling an

[19] "It was the discord that had struck him so many years earlier … It had been the discord of the two, cracked limestone wall and gleaming motor parts" (Kushner 2013: 39). Jameson's hypothesis is supported by Ram (2012).

emancipatory non-relationality, then, speed becomes harnessed to a petro-infrastructure which inculcates the very neoliberal entrapment in the personal from which "Reno" desires to escape.

This infrastructure, however, is not limited to the confines of a single nation-state. Perhaps inspired by Henry Ford's ill-fated Amazonian "utopia" of "Fordlandia," Valera's tyre business comes to rely upon imported Brazilian rubber. Once a major late nineteenth-century commodity frontier, wreaking genocidal devastation in the Amazon basin, by the 1920s Asia had become the world capital of rubber production. Yet when Valera's supplies from Malaysia are cut off, he – like Ford – turns to the Amazon. Realising his futurist roots, Valera subordinates nature and the local "Indians" to his will: "The jungle was a standing army, a reserve that would summon forth a product, become something other than green, useless, hostile nature, and Valera liked this idea, of conscripting nature into service" (Kushner 2013: 126). The indigenous tappers work on credit: "It was all indebtedness and credit, zero outlay of actual money. Credit came from *credo*, which was to believe. … The Indians in the jungle were going to work for free" (127). If the labourers fail to conform to the "optimum calibration" for profit – i.e., "within human limits, but just barely" (127) – they are kept in line by "cheap muzzle-loaders, mock drownings … and various further entrenchments of [their] peon status" (214). This is the primal scene of primitive accumulation at the periphery of the world-system – direct personal violence and slavery mediated by credit – which is the material precondition of the cultures of speed and petro-privatism at the core.

Fundamentally, then, *The Flamethrowers* is a novel about a historical period in which the great revolutionary desire for an anonymous, impersonal absolute – a passion for the real – becomes almost indistinguishable from the absolute speed of capital. The genius of Kushner's novel, however, lies in the manner in which it demonstrates that the great, uneven struggle of capital and communism cannot be neatly mapped on to the structuring binaries of the novel itself – speed versus slowness, action versus waiting, naming versus anonymity. Rather, the central contradiction *internally divides each term of the binary*. Thus, "waiting" is split between a communist anticipation of the evental insurrection *and* the patience intrinsic to the art of the business deal (a capitalist *kairos*) (cf. 129). It is precisely this process of internal diremption which, I have been

arguing, occurs in the dialectic of capitalist impersonality and personalisation in general: persons split into structural personifications, romantic neoterritorialisations, and state interpellations; impersonality splits into capitalist axiomatics, reactionary neo-territorialisations and emancipatory depersonalisations. If the "passion for the real" is to be inherited in the neoliberal present it must pass by way of these immanent socio-cultural mediations whose ultimate scope is the capitalist world-system itself.

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